

doi: 10.26529/cepsj.846

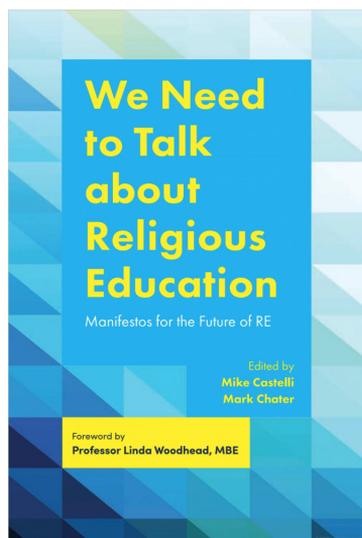
Mike Castelli and Mark Chater, *We need to talk about religious education: Manifestos for the future of RE*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London, UK & Philadelphia, PA, 2018; 264 pp.: ISBN: 9781785922696

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When discussing religious education (RE), the conversation in journals or monographs is often conducted by academics with particular agendas for what should or should not be included in the curriculum, how the content flow should be designed, and what the aims of the subject should be. That is what makes the book *We Need to Talk About Religious Education: Manifestos for the Future of RE* so refreshing and exciting; the book is academic in nature and writing style yet includes more than just individuals with academic experiences. There are several chapters written by current and/or former practitioners

of RE – teachers and those implementing the curriculum into classrooms and teaching processes. This makes for an exciting look under the hood of RE and lends the topic immediacy, tangibility, and relevance.

We Need to Talk About Religious Education is edited by Mike Castelli and Mark Chater; both former RE teachers and RE curriculum advisers, now involved in executive-level organising of the UK Association of University Lecturers in Religion and Education (Mike Castelli), and Culham St. Gabriel's charitable trust that supports research, development, and innovation in RE (Mark Chater). The book has fifteen other contributors (Phil Champain, Dawn Cox, Gillian, Georgiou, Derek Holloway, Zameer Hussain, Richard Kueh, Clive A. Lawton, Andrew Lewis, Neil McKain, Mary Myatt, James Robson, Sushma Sahajpal, Peter Schreiner, Adam Whitlock, and Kathryn Wright), mostly current or former RE teachers, RE curriculum advisers, RE consultants, and religious



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community representatives – all very passionate about RE and deeply involved with it on the ground.

The book is divided into two halves – *Context* and *Futures* – balanced quite equally with seven and eight chapters respectively. Framing everything are a foreword by Linda Woodhead, a general introduction by the editors, and a postscript by Zameer Hussain. Although the two parts nominally have a clear purpose – to set out and explain the context and the state of RE, and then to imagine the various futures into which RE could be taken with appropriate action – the titles are slightly deceiving, as the chapters in both halves include explanations of the context of a particular aspect of RE as well as calls to imagined futures for the subject, thus creating a whole that is only artificially and arbitrarily divided into two segments. The chapters do fall into two clusters: the first part offering chapters of a more ‘theoretic’ nature (such as the influence of Europe-wide educational policies or the issue with defining the purpose of RE) and the second part presenting chapters on the more ‘practical’ side of RE (making a case for structured dialogue, discussing ‘safe space,’ or examining teachers’ online engagement), yet the two titles – *Contexts* and *Futures* – do not adequately capture the emphases of the two parts of the book.

It must be said that the title of the book is somewhat misleading as well. While the title mentions no geographical delineation of *which* religious education we need to talk about (Is it RE in general? Maybe RE in Europe?), the blurb on the back loosely refers to the UK, and it is indeed British Religious Education that the contributors are talking about and inviting us to discuss with them. Yet even that is not completely accurate, as the book addresses solely and exclusively RE as it is organised, implemented, and practised in *England*. There is no discussion (or even mention) of the fact that RE is organised differently in England than it is, for example, in Scotland, where it also exists under a different name, *Religious and Moral* (sometimes also *Philosophical*) *Education* (RME). The contributors to this collection have all with the exception of one (i.e., Peter Schreiner from the University of Mainz, Germany) been selected from England and – quite naturally – talk primarily about the context they are familiar with and the expertise they have acquired about *English* RE. Yet it is a failing on the part of the book’s editors that they have not included any contributors from other parts of the United Kingdom, or even nodded to the fact that that is the case. It might be that experts or expert practitioners knowledgeable about Scottish RME are thin on the ground, but an acknowledgement from the editors and a brief explanation or speculation as to why that might be the case could nevertheless be expected from a book with such a broadly delineated title.

To return to the two sections of the book for my second major criticism of the collection; the context of the English RE is not well explained and is, in fact, poorly set out. While seven chapters purportedly deal with the *context* of RE in England, the book actually assumes a quite high level of familiarity with the English RE system. The first chapter in the collection – Clive A. Lawton’s *Time to Abandon Religious Education: Ditching an Out-of-Date Solution to an Out-of-Date Problem* – provides some historical context for the English RE of today, but chapters that follow do not systematically present the regulatory, organisational, and/or practical context of RE. The reader collects bits and pieces of information as they go along, learning about NATRE (National Association for Teachers of RE) or SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on RE) without having much contextual information to tie it into a broader framework of understanding. This makes the book a bit uninviting to those not already familiar with English RE; a familiarity typically acquired either through the personal experience of being a pupil (or a teacher) in an RE classroom, or studying the English RE system as a researcher interested in religious education more generally. Again, I attribute this limitation of the book to its editors. Had they included another contributor with the explicit aim of writing a chapter that provides an introduction to the subject of RE the rest of the collection addresses – or better yet, written it themselves – the book would have been a much more informative and enjoyable read. It would also clearly invite foreign practitioners, researchers, and thinkers to engage with the material in its entirety without having to wade through the confusion of the English RE system unaided.

Nevertheless, the two shortcomings of the collection – its focus on England and its assumption of readers’ familiarity with the English RE context – should not deter one from picking up this genuinely engaging book. Every chapter highlights a different aspect of the English RE system, raises different fundamental questions about the subject to consider, and invokes a different path toward a future incarnation of Religious Education. Although it is based on the English RE system, the questions and suggestions the chapters discuss are almost always universally applicable to other national contexts and provide a valuable starting point for a plethora of thinking streams and possible imaginings of the future for Religious Education anywhere. Particularly the chapters in the second part of the book would also be useful for those training future teachers of RE, as they focus on single issues from within the RE classrooms. Arguing for more difficult and challenging content in RE, highlighting elements of dialogue vital to RE teaching, suggestions for creating and conducting safe space for the discussion of ‘unsafe’ ideas in RE classrooms, challenging misconceptions and potential radicalisation within the context of RE, including first-hand

experience of religious communities for RE pupils, encouraging RE teachers to engage with ongoing academic research in the field of religious studies and theology, and the potentials and pitfalls of online social groups as continuing professional development for RE teachers – those should all be of interest and of value for RE teachers and those training and consulting them.

Conversely, the first part of the book will likely pique more interest amongst academics, who enjoy parsing through historical and cultural elements of contemporary RE organisation (in England), the hidden impact of international educational policies on national RE, the arguments for knowledge being the primary aim and orientation of the RE curriculum, calls for legislative change in the legal organisation of RE, discussion of confessional RE juxtaposed with its non-confessional counterpart, exploration of the balance between theology, philosophy, and social sciences in RE curriculum, and an enquiry into the possibility of a spiritual development emphases within an RE curriculum. The two halves together, therefore, invite both scholars and practitioners to the debate, as well as give food for thought to the decision-makers on local, national, and international levels.

The collection as a whole, as well as its individual chapters, are a useful tool to think with and to use in university classrooms. The chapters are engaging, to the point, and overall of very high quality. The depth and divergence of approaches to RE are definitely the book's strength, and I would recommend the collection to all those engaged in training RE teachers, intrigued by the imaginings of possible futures for RE, and interested in English RE in particular.